

The Auschwitz reflections

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The memories of the biggest crimes of the last war – Auschwitz, Hiroshima, and Japanese bacteriological weapons – did not lose their horrifying features with time, as many people could have hoped. The burden of the people responsible, and to some extent that of the whole civilised world, has not become less heavy.

The questions of “how” and “why”, instead of becoming less important, have been returning again and again to the minds of a growing number of people and still remain unanswered. How could such crimes happen at all? How could people be so cruel towards innocent victims, and how was it possible for some victims to survive those cruelties? To what extent did the crimes of the last war influence their immediate victims, and those who were touched only indirectly? In other words, have they influenced the ongoing history of individuals and humanity? If so, what impact have they made? One does not know if these questions will be answered satisfactorily. Each attempt to answer them touches the deepest and the most important problems of human life. These problems usually are never fully explained.

In a sense, the duty of a psychiatrist whose area of specialisation is the holistic approach to human life is to try, even awkwardly, to answer some of those questions. The questions bring a new light upon human nature, and in this way extend the perspective a psychiatrist uses.

Erich Fromm [1, 2], an American sociologist and psychiatrist and one of the founders of the so called “cultural school” in psychiatry, believes that contemporary civilisation is characterised by a contradiction between actuality and abstraction. The influence of technology makes the environment emotionally distant for human beings, rendering it detached and unfamiliar. The change in battle style that has accompanied advances in technology serves as an example. While in the past enemies were fighting in direct contact with each other, contemporary war technology makes the contact impersonal and unemotional. A pilot, who may without emotion push a button to kill thousands of people, may grieve the death of his pet. To the pilot, the thousands of people are an abstraction, however, the beloved dog is an actuality.

The human being perceives the surrounding world from the perspective of his or her influence on it. The nervous system construction itself inseparably ties perception with activity. A neuron receives information (impulses) from its environment through many dendrites and, using one channel (axon), sends a command to act. The basic physiological unit, a reflex pathway, is composed of an afferent part and efferent part. In such a way, the nervous system structure limits a living organism’s cognitive abilities within the frames of its action.

Homo faber forms his or her view of the world congruently with a tool he or she uses to conquer this world. The world had been perceived differently when man had a stone or a club than when he/she is using complicated technological equipment.

Probably one of the greatest risks of the development of technology, besides unquestionable

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profits, is the technical approach to the whole world. In other words, the world is being conquered with the scope of machinery. Machinery becomes more important than human beings and becomes a criterion of human achievements. The surrounding world turns into something dead, emotionally unmoving, if not hostile. One can do anything with the world, according to actual needs. The human world is above all a social environment, so one approaches it in the same manner as one approaches other people and the community. A human being is a piece of machinery, more or less effective in his/her works, and needing a rest or repair from time to time. At times, chemical compounds must be administered or an operation performed, but then the human, or machine, may resume work. A community is a complicated piece of machinery, composed of millions of cog-wheels and gears (human beings), which can be steered or eliminated. Needless to say, this picture of the human world, and actually the whole living world, is not true.

A human being does not want to be regarded as a cog-wheel; his/her sense of freedom (Pavlovian liberty reflex) rebels against it, as well as his/her need for emotional response. A human being can not be emotionally dull, as a part of machinery is; he or she must love and hate, and be loved and hated. By accepting the technical approach to the world one becomes not only alone and abandoned, but endangered as well. The world seems to be dangerous and hostile.

The feeling of emotional isolation arouses a longing for strong attachment, leading to the formation of artificial groups which serve any paranoiac system. An individual in such a group is tied with "eternal" bonds, and sacrifices everything for the grand "ideas". A sense of being a robot is compensated with the grandiosity of an "idea" and the emotional group bonds; without "comrades" one would stay a lonely cog-wheel, nothing. For that reason, the decomposition of the monolithic unanimity of the group leads immediately to group dispersion. The complicated social machinery disarranges into useless gears and cogwheels – being artificial is temporary.

In the "machinery community", any sense of responsibility disappears. This responsibility is obviously essential for normal human de-

velopment. In that type of community, one subordinates to orders only, becoming a robot, and his/her development is arrested at a dwarfed human being. Guilt, a normal consequence of crimes committed, decreases to null. It is difficult to feel guilty towards a subject (a gear cannot be offended), and it is difficult to feel guilty while being an automaton blindly fulfilling orders. Nevertheless, the absence of guilt does not eliminate responsibility; one remains responsible for his/her actions and for becoming a robot.

The problem is not in disavowing guilt of war criminals (however it is worth noting that they usually notoriously deny any guilt), nor in understanding the mechanism of war crimes (this is a very complicated and still unclear process). My aim is to turn attention to the risk of criminal behaviour, which is often inconsiderate, hidden within the technical approach to human beings and community. The technical approach to the world should not, of course, be confused with technological progress. The first may be dangerous, the latter – profitable.

In his book, Adolf Gawalewicz [3] says that only a few succeeded in escaping from "the waiting room to the gas chamber" (Auschwitz Block VII). The prisoners believed in "impossible, incredible things", meaning "they would get out, against all obstacles". It is obvious the belief itself was not enough, one had to mobilize oneself to act within the real limits of possibility – as minimal and hopeless as they were – to influence one's behaviour. One had to be an "active muslim". The author brings up a significant example showing the importance of the words "I want" for survival in the concentration camp. "Who thought another way, did not live. One night one of my colleagues, still in very good physical condition, confessed to me: I am fed up, this all is hopeless, and I do not want to live any longer. A couple of hours later we took his corpse out from the block."

One should not forget that not so long ago, before World War II, the majority of psychiatrists and psychologists were of the opinion that free will did not exist. However, in a situation of maximal slavery and complete disregard of human dignity and ability to make a choice, the will to survive appeared to be decisive for survival.

It may seem paradoxical, but those who were in a terminal situation could say "I want" or "I do

not want", while their perpetrators, who were in an incomparable better physical and moral situation, could not. In a concentration camp, the true living people were those put on the verge of death, while those who had death signs on their caps were not living people, but robots.

In spite of the abundance of literature on concentration camps, one who has not lived through the ordeal of the camp cannot envision how it was. Days and nights were filled with suffering beyond the limits of human imagination. However, the issue has been approached by even the best writers. Zofia Nałkowska, a member of the International Commission for Nazi Crimes Studying, visited the sites of concentration camps and mass murders, talked with survivors and witnesses, and composed her impressions in "Medaliony"[4]. The book has been regarded as an excellent, shocking, and synthesizing document of Nazi crimes, therefore playing a specific role in concentration camp literature. She realized that "what people went through [in Nazi concentration camps and prisons] could not be expressed in words". Somebody trying to grasp the immense size of these crimes finds it difficult to get to them at all. In "Medaliony", Nałkowska wrote: "Reality can be lived through, as not all is given in experience, or not all at the same time. It comes to us in fragments of events, scraps of realization. Our thinking of it is an attempt to bring it together, immobilize it and understand".

That was a different world, as different from ours as the world of the psychotic person. Upon entering concentration camps, prisoners often experienced an acute derealisation state; what they were seeing seemed unreal, like a terrify-

ing nightmare. The difference between what they saw and the ordinary human world was enormous. "I thought: all this cannot be true, it is a dream fantasy..." recalls Gawalewicz [3].

A psychosis, especially the schizophrenic type, leaves a mark; a person is changed. Similarly, people who went through the concentration camp became different people. In actuality, they found it difficult to adapt to normal, ordinary life afterward. The way they assessed other people had changed, at least for some time, as well as their hierarchy of values, life goals, and even personality. On the other hand, the concentration camp was a kind of test of their endurance. Within every person, there is a heroic portion, a need to check oneself: how much can I withstand, what are my abilities? Perhaps this is the reason why young boys go through tests of endurance in so called "primitive" cultures. They are recognized as adult men only after completing these tests. Those who survived the concentration camp had stood its trial. Maybe this is the reason for their alienation from other people and longing for a group of other survivors, as only they are capable of understanding.

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